

Commerce Chief Threatened Firings at NOAA After Trump's Hurricane Tweets, Sources Say

Image



President Trump at a Sept. 1 update on Hurricane Dorian's progress. Credit: Jacquelyn Martin/Associated Press



By Christopher Flavelle, Lisa Friedman and Peter Baker

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WASHINGTON — The Secretary of Commerce threatened to fire top employees at NOAA on Friday after the agency's Birmingham office contradicted President Trump's claim that Hurricane Dorian might hit Alabama, according to three people familiar with the discussion.

That threat led to [an unusual, unsigned statement](#) later that Friday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration disavowing the office's own position that Alabama was not at risk. The reversal caused widespread anger within the agency and drew criticism from the scientific community that NOAA, a division of the Commerce Department, had been bent to political purposes.

Officials at the White House and the Commerce Department declined to comment on administration involvement in the NOAA statement.

The actions by the Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur L. Ross Jr., are the latest developments in a political imbroglio that began more than a week ago, when Dorian was bearing down on the Bahamas and Mr. Trump [wrote on Twitter](#) that Alabama would be hit "harder than anticipated." A few minutes later, the National Weather Service in Birmingham, Ala., [posted on Twitter](#) that "Alabama will NOT see any impacts from Dorian. We repeat, no impacts from Hurricane Dorian will be felt across Alabama."

What on Earth Is Going On?

Mr. Trump persisted in saying that Alabama was at risk and a few days later, on Sept. 4, he displayed a NOAA map that appeared to have been altered with a black Sharpie to include Alabama in the area potentially affected by Dorian.

Mr. Ross, the Commerce Secretary, intervened two days later, early last Friday, according to the three people familiar with his actions. Mr. Ross phoned Neil Jacobs, the acting administrator of NOAA, from Greece where the secretary was traveling for meetings and instructed Dr. Jacobs to fix the agency's perceived contradiction of the president.

Dr. Jacobs objected to the demand and was told that the political staff at NOAA would be fired if the situation was not fixed, according to the three individuals, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the episode. Unlike career government employees, political staff are appointed by the administration. They usually include a handful of top officials, such as Dr. Jacobs, and their aides.

Editors' Picks

Image



Commerce secretary Wilbur Ross in August of this year. CreditEraldo Peres/Associated Press

However, a senior administration official who asked not to be identified when discussing internal deliberations said that the Birmingham office had been wrong and that NOAA had simply done the responsible thing and corrected the record.

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That official suggested the Twitter post by the Birmingham forecasters had been motivated by a desire to embarrass the president more than concern for the safety of people in Alabama. The official provided no evidence to support that conclusion.

On Monday, Craig N. McLean, NOAA's acting chief scientist, sent an email to staff members notifying the agency that he was looking into "potential violations" in the agency's decision to ultimately back Mr. Trump's statements rather than those of its own scientists. He called the agency's action "a danger to public health and safety."

Dr. Jacobs is scheduled to speak Tuesday at a weather industry conference in Huntsville, Ala.

On Monday, the National Weather Service director, Louis W. Uccellini, got a standing ovation from conference attendees when he praised the work of the Birmingham office and said staff members there had acted "with one thing in mind, public safety" when they contradicted Mr. Trump's claim that Alabama was at risk.